

Exploring Qualitative Approaches to Evaluation: Multiple Perspectives of the Influence of Integrated Conservation/Development Projects

Final Technical Report for 2007 IDRC Evaluation Research Award

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1. Calendar of Activities

The following calendar of activities summarizes in chronological order my research activities under the 2007 IDRC Evaluation Research Award, carried out in Nicaragua. The activities were conducted in three main research sites: 1) Nueva Guinea, Case Study #1, in the southeast region of Nicaragua; 2) San Juan del Rio Coco, Case Study #2, in the northern mountainous region of Nicaragua; and 3) Matagalpa, Case Study #3, in the central/north region of Nicaragua.

DATE (2007)	ACTIVITY	LOCATION**
April 18 th	Arrived in host country	Managua
April 19 th /20 th	Meetings with host organization Rainforest Alliance, registration with Canadian Embassy	Managua
April 22 nd – May 4 th	Two weeks of Spanish refresher course Reconnaissance activities – contacting and meeting with chosen and potential project sites for research	Matagalpa
April 28	Attended “Coffee Fair” with Rainforest Alliance (host organization) – a collection of booths and talks from organizations, companies, government, and independent farms involved in coffee in Nicaragua	Ocotol
May 5 - 9	Contact and meetings with chosen and potential project sites for research. Visited Ministry of Environment’s headquarters (MARENA) to use library resources.	Matagalpa & Managua
May 10 th	Arrived at Project Site #1, Sano y Salvo	Nueva Guinea
May 11 th	Meeting with coordinators of Sano y Salvo to discuss research, information needs, and opportunities to meet with participants	Nueva Guinea
May 12 th - May 20 th	Review of reports and print material in library Conducted interviews with key organizations in town	Nueva Guinea
May 21-22	Attended Community Council Meeting of Sano y Salvo Planning and logistics for first trip into countryside to interview participants	Nueva Guinea
May 23 rd – June 1st	Trip to communities of Paraíso de Aguas Zarcas, San Pedro de Piedras Finas, and Montes Verdes to interview	Nueva Guinea

	participants	
June 2 nd – June 5 th	Interviews with key organizations in town Document review Typing up interview notes	Nueva Guinea
June 6 th – June 12 th	Trip to communities of Maria Christina and Julio Buyetrigo to interview participants	Rama
June 13 th -14 th	Typing up interview notes	Nueva Guinea
June 15-16 th	Treatment for parasite infection	Managua
June 18 th - June 24 th	Trip to communities in Punta Gorda to interview participants	Nueva Guinea
June 25 th – June 29 th	Interviews with key organizations in town Document review	Nueva Guinea
June 30 th – June 15 th	Typing up interview notes Planning and logistics for visit to Project Site #2 Visa renewal in Managua	Matagalpa
June 16 th	Arrived at Project Site #2, Rainforest Alliance certified coffee at CORCASAN cooperative	San Juan del Rio Coco
June 17 th – June 22 nd	Meeting with CORCASAN staff to discuss research, information needs, and opportunities to meet with participants Planning and logistics for interviews Document review of reports and print materials in CORCASAN office	San Juan del Rio Coco
June 23 rd – June 27 th	Participant interviews	San Juan del Rio Coco
June 28/29	Typing up interview notes Planning and logistics for next set of interviews	Esteli & San Juan del Rio Coco
June 30 th to August 3 rd	Participant interviews Interviews with key organizations in town	San Juan del Rio Coco
August 5/6 th	Travel to Nueva Guinea (Project Site #1)	Various
August 7 th	Attended Community Council Meeting of Project Site #1 to present preliminary results	Nueva Guinea
August 8 th	Attended Organic Cacao Cooperative Meeting	Nueva Guinea
August 9/10	Organization interviews Document collection	Nueva Guinea
August 11/12	Return to San Juan del Rio Coco (Project Site #2)	Various
August 13 th – 17 th	Participant interviews Organization interviews Document review	San Juan del Rio Coco
August 18 th /19 th	Typing up interview notes Planning and logistics for next set of interviews	Esteli & San Juan del Rio Coco
August 20 th – August 24 th	Participant interviews Organization interviews	San Juan del Rio Coco
August 25/26	Travel to Managua	Various

August 27 to 31 st	Meetings with head office of host organization in San José, Costa Rica Document review of available documents & reports	**San José, Costa Rica
September 3/4 th	Contacting and liaising with Managua based contacts Ramacafe – coffee conference	Managua
September 5 th	Arrive in Project Site #3, Café Ecoforestal	Matagalpa
September 6 th – 9 th	Meeting with coordinators of Café Ecoforestal, to discuss research, information needs, and opportunities to meet with participants Document review of project and evaluation reports	Matagalpa
September 10 th – 16 th	Organization interviews Typing up interview notes	Matagalpa
September 17 th – 23 rd	Participant interviews Organization interviews Typing up interview notes	Matagalpa
September 21 st	Attended “Information Exchange” day with Rainforest Alliance representatives on a certified coffee hacienda Interview with Rainforest Alliance representative	Jinotega (1 hour away from Matagalpa)
September 24 th – September 30 th	Organization interviews, typing up interview notes, and document review of reports for Project Site #3	Matagalpa
October 1 st – October 4 th	Attended Sano & Salvo workshop to conduct Focus Groups with interview participants of Project #1 Final organization interviews	Nueva Guinea
October 5 th – 12 th	Participant interviews for Project Site #3	Matagalpa
October 13 th – 16 th	Attended Sano & Salvo women’s workshop to conduct further interviews with women participants in Project #1	Nueva Guinea
October 16 th	Return to Matagalpa, Project Site #3	Matagalpa
October 17 th	Typing up field notes, interview notes	Matagalpa
October 18 th – 20 th	Focus Groups for Project Site #2	San Juan del Rio Coco
October 21 st	Return to Project Site #3	Matagalpa
October 22 nd – November 11 th	Participant interviews Organization interviews Document review	Matagalpa & Jinotega
Nov 12 th – Nov 25 th	Review of total material collected Followed up on gaps in documents, information yet to be received, and transcription of interview notes	Various (Esteli, San Juan del Rio Coco, Managua)
November 26 th – December 2 nd	Wrap up of research Packing for return trip Notation of areas to follow up on upon return	Matagalpa, Nicaragua
December 3 rd	Travel to Halifax, Canada	Various
December 4 th	Due to travel delays, arrive in Halifax, Canada	

**Unless otherwise specified, all locations are in Nicaragua

2. Narrative of Fieldwork Accomplished

Overview

The fieldwork for my PhD Dissertation was carried out between April 18th and December 4th, 2007, in Nicaragua. My study focused on the evaluation of agroforestry projects with the twin goals of conserving biodiversity and ecosystems and improving rural socio-economic conditions. My three main research objectives were 1) to gain an in-depth understanding of how agroforestry projects are influencing poverty reduction (looking at factors such as food security, health and well-being and gender issues) and ecosystem health, using qualitative assessment approaches; 2) to explore what information is revealed from a qualitative assessment compared with that reflected in current mainly quantitative evaluation mechanisms; and 3) to contribute to procedures and/or tools that integrate qualitative assessment methods in the evaluation of agriculturally focused conservation and development projects, in order that projects better reflect community needs and advance towards meeting both biodiversity and social goals.

Three case study agroforestry projects/programs were looked at in my research: Sano y Salvo, an association of farmers in southeastern Nicaragua implementing an agroforestry project where cacao was the main cash crop; Rainforest Alliance, administering a coffee certification program that promotes both biodiversity protection and socio-economic improvements, focusing on the co-operative CORCASAN, the first coffee co-operative to attain the certification in Nicaragua; and Café Ecoforestal, a project administered through the Nicaraguan Ministry of Environment and Resource Management, promoting ecologically, socially and economically beneficial coffee production.

My research activities involved an ethnographic approach including: in-depth interviews with project participants about their experience, combined with an on-site farm visit; interviews with organizations at various levels in the fields of agroforestry, environment, health, development, and women's issues; conversations with community-members who were not part of the project; casual conversations with community member when the opportunity arose; observations and field notes throughout the research period; focus groups with participants (where possible); document review of evaluation reports and material (where available), and the collection of other print and electronic material relevant to my objectives and research questions.

Across all three case studies, interviews of varying lengths were conducted with a total of 39 project participants, 13 non-participants, and 31 organizations, for a total of 83 interviews. Only 4 focus groups were conducted, mainly due to logistical difficulties (see Methodological Issues below). Official evaluation documents were only available for one case study; however relevant material including audit reports and reports to funders were collected for the remaining two.

Due to logistics and timing, only superficial analysis and synthesis was possible in the field, and the bulk of the research trip was focused on data collection. In-depth analysis using a qualitative analysis software program will be carried out on the data now that I have returned to Canada. Overall, however, all required information to answer my research questions and obtain my three research objectives was successfully attained on this field research trip.

Methodological Issues

I encountered three main methodological issues during the field component of my research, requiring some adaptation once in the field. These revolved around the number of case studies actually included in my study, recruitment plan for interview participants, and the use of focus groups. These are each described in more detail below.

Four case agroforestry case studies were originally proposed for this research project. One case study was chosen before the research trip, that of Rainforest Alliance, my host organization. Once in the host country, several projects were identified throughout the research period that would have been suitable for this research. However due to the logistical and transportation difficulties characteristic of Nicaragua (see Successes and Problems in Data Collection below), not all suitable projects could be studied within the allotted research time. The result was that three case studies, as opposed to four, were studied that varied in geographic area, type of administration, funder and implementing agency. I believe that these three case studies together provide sufficient information to achieve my original research objectives.

My recruitment plan was adjusted slightly in some case studies once I was in the field. My original plan was to recruit participants using maximum distribution sampling from a list of project participants, ensuring a diversity of perspectives is captured across age, sex, and income distribution. In one case study especially, participant lists were not kept up to date or were incomplete. On several occasions I chose my sample of 10 interviewees only to arrive at their farm and find out they were not in the project and had not been for years, or even worse, was unable to find the physical person who matched the name or anyone who knew of their existence. In this case, I used snowball sampling for participant interviews, asking each participant I did find and interviewed for the name of another participant in the general area.

Although 16 focus groups were outlined in my proposal, I was only able to carry out four of these. The main difficulty was the distance between farms in communities, making it difficult to find one central meeting place for the focus groups. Some farms were two days away from the main town, and it was unrealistic to ask farmers to travel two days for a short focus group. Women especially were unable to leave their homes due to household responsibilities and gender/role issues. I therefore had to take advantage of existing meeting opportunities to try and conduct focus groups, yet these opportunities were not available in all three case studies. The result was that only four of the originally planned 16 focus groups were able to be completed.

Successes and Problems in Data Collection

Research in Nicaragua was especially challenging due to the following obstacles:

- *Transportation* – infrequent or lack of public transportation, poor state of existing roads, or in some cases lack of roads entirely, made access to my interview participants difficult. In one project site, some farms were up to two days travel away, extending the amount of time required to conduct the number of interviews intended for the research.

- *Weather* – The majority of my data collection took part during the Nicaraguan rainy season. Rain made the roads very difficult to travel on by any mode of transportation (vehicle or foot). During periods of intense rain I was unable to conduct interviews as planned and had to wait for an opportunity when the weather was clearer.
- *Energy Crisis* – Throughout my research period Nicaragua was undergoing an energy crisis and had daily scheduled brown outs throughout the country. In addition, many communities I visited had no access to electricity at all. This made it difficult to type up my research notes, prepare material for focus groups or presentations, or conduct preliminary analyses.

Other problems I encountered during my research were that the projects chosen did not have a clear evaluation system to which I could compare my qualitative data; incomplete and out of date information in project files (including participant lists), and confusion and overlap of multiple projects operating in the same area confounding participants' understanding of with which project they were actually associated.

Despite these challenges I had many successes in my data collection. The majority of people I interviewed were enthusiastic about the opportunity to discuss their experience with the project and were eager to hear more about what I had found when my research was completed. The time I spent actually living in the homes and communities of the people I was interviewing provided me with invaluable observation time to note down issues that may not have come up in the interviews, and also provided me with multiple contacts with interview participants to follow up on and ask additional questions. Every organization I approached was extremely generous in their time to talk to me about their own programs and perspectives, and I often came away with print and electronic documents that I had not even anticipated in my research planning. Overall my research experience was an enjoyable and rewarding one.

Summary of Results/Findings

Research results and findings are summarized below based on the first three of four research questions I set out to accomplish: 1) understanding a project's influence on poverty and ecosystem health using a qualitative assessment; 2) information revealed by current (mainly quantitative) evaluation mechanisms; and 3) how information collected in my qualitative assessment compares to current evaluation mechanisms. The fourth research question (how qualitative assessment of a project's influence can be better integrated into evaluation mechanisms) will come out of further analysis and comparison of data and can not be commented on at this time. As my field research focused mainly on data collection, this presentation of results and analysis is highly preliminary.

Influence of agroforestry projects on poverty alleviation and ecosystem health

This first research question involved an exploration of how agroforestry projects are influencing poverty alleviation and ecosystem health, using qualitative approaches and focusing on the perspective of project participants themselves. It looked at questions such as changes in general well-being as a result of being part of the project, how food security had changed, and how

participants *feel* different about themselves after joining the project. As the three case studies were quite variable, each one will be discussed separately.

In the first case study, Sano y Salvo, immediate impacts on poverty reduction were not seen in terms of income, as the main cash crop (cacao) had not yet reached harvesting age. Despite this, several points suggesting a positive impact on poverty reduction arose during my interviews. Interviewees' positive comments on their experience with the project included the opportunity to share ideas and discuss with other farmers and families, learning new ideas and agricultural practices through discussions and regular workshops, a change in mentality from growth of annuals to ecological farming, and environmental improvement through the elimination of the use of pesticides in the farm. Commonly expressed was a feeling of camaraderie and teamship, that as part of the project they could do things that alone were difficult to accomplish.

The second case study was complicated by the fact that three different coffee certifications were available with the co-operative, and participants regularly confused the type they had if they had more than one. Also, most participants tended to have mid-sized farms, and the true small farmers in a less favourable economic condition in the region did not have the certification. I followed this up by interviewing workers on the farms, who often had a few acres of land of their own and used off farm labour to supplement their household. For those who were part of the certification program, again the idea of knowledge gained from the program surfaced, as well as an increase in confidence of farming practices, environmental improvement, and a feeling of personal well-being as people were proud to be part of a certification that was helping the environment.

The third case study was the most complicated of the three. It consisted of two Phases, and three tracks in the second Phase, run by three different implementing agencies that were all overseen by a department in the Ministry. This project varied immensely from the other two in that it consisted mainly of a resource gifting project, with less educational/workshop opportunities. Associated with this, many participants interviewed did not know the name of the project they were part of, and had trouble commenting on their experience. Through interviewing participants at both Phases and various tracks of the program, I was able to get some significant information on how the project was or was not helping the socio-economic situation of farmers in the region.

2. Review of current evaluation mechanisms

Relevant evaluation documents and project reports were collected and given a preliminary review for all three case studies. Case Study #1, Sano y Salvo, did not have an official evaluation system in place, but do have plans for a participatory evaluation system. For the agroforestry project studies, I reviewed reports to the main funder, the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) of Conservation International. These reports are mainly quantitative descriptions of impact, as following the requested format by the funder. Case Study #2, coffee certification under Rainforest Alliance, also does not have an official evaluation system. Impact is ascertained through adherence to certification regulations. For this case I collected and reviewed the regulations and internal audit report specific to the CORCASAN co-operative. Case Study #3, was the only project to have several evaluation reports by external consultants.

From a preliminary review, although interviews were stated as part of the protocol, most data summarized is quantitative in nature.

3. Comparison of qualitative assessment with current evaluation mechanisms

This portion of the research will be conducted once an in-depth qualitative analysis has been conducted on the interview and observation data.

Preliminary Analysis

As stated above, only a cursory analysis of the information I collected during my field work has been possible at this time. From the interviews, observations and documents I have collected, and through the review of existing evaluation documents, it appears that there are several issues that became apparent that were not identified or discussed in the evaluation documents. Each case study is unique and will require an analysis both within and amongst the case studies in order to bring to light issues that may help all agroforestry projects in general. Further analysis of this material will allow me to explore how qualitative assessments can help strengthen the learning role of evaluation and help integrated conservation and development projects better meet both community and conservation goals.

Conclusion

Now that my period in the field has been completed, I will be embarking on in-depth qualitative analysis of the three project sites where I collected information. I am confident that with the information and data I have collected my analysis will produce the intended outcomes outlined in my thesis proposal. Namely, I will be able to better understand each project's intended and unintended influences, identify how agroforestry projects are influencing poverty alleviation, illustrate how qualitative approaches can provide additional value in evaluation processes, and contribute to the use and development of practical evaluation procedures and/or tools that better reflect community needs and assist in improved success at meeting both biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation goals.